

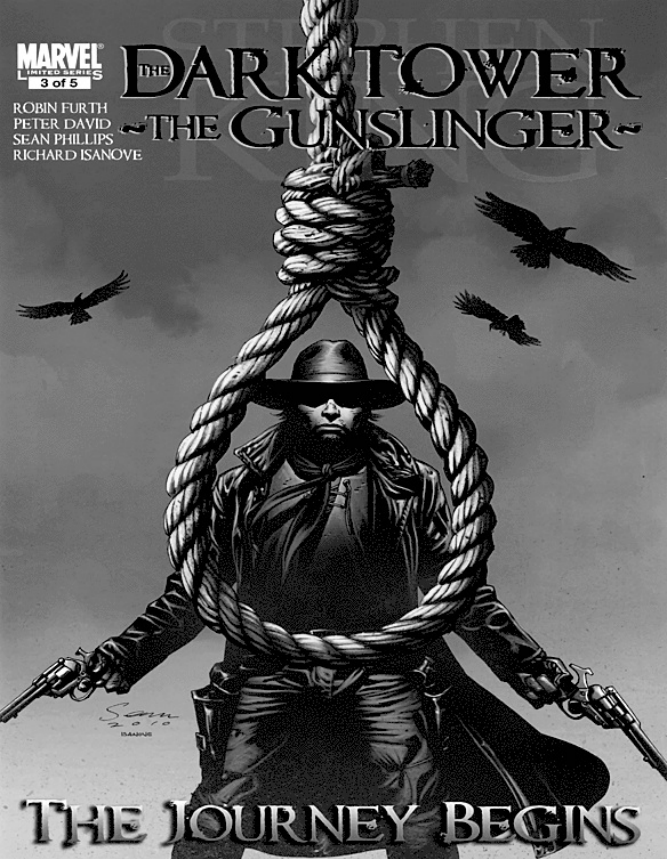
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THE DARK TOWER THE GUNSLINGER



Sean
2010
ILLUSTRATION

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

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IN A WORLD THAT HAS MOVED ON...

Roland Deschain is the last descendant of the line of Arthur Eld. His late father, Steven, was the king of the barony of Gilead. Seeking to emulate his father, Roland was the youngest man to ever become a gunslinger. Great forces have swirled around him since that day.

When Gilead was under attack by the armies of evil led by Walter O'Dim and the Good Man, John Farson, Steven Deschain was killed. His forces of the White known as The Affiliation faltered in their defense of the city. Roland and his ka-tet became Gilead's final barrier, and they, too, failed.

And for nigh unto ten years, Roland, the lone survivor of that last, losing battle, has pursued his destiny. His quest is to reach the mysterious Dark Tower wherein he can set this out-of-synch world right. And the key to his goal lies with the Man in Black, who Roland now doggedly tracks.

Along the way, the gunslinger stops at the cabin of an old man, when his mule dies of exhaustion. At dinner that evening, Roland reminisces about the aftermath of the battle of Jericho Hill wherein his entire ka-tet was slain, and Deschain himself was dumped upon a pile of corpses.

But one ka-tet member, Aileen, survives, though barely. She begs Roland to return her to Gilead to be buried with her father, Cort.

Once back in the ruins of his home barony and Aileen's burial complete, Roland encounters the ghost of Hax, the once chief chef in the kingdom's castle.



Long dead was Haxx, the cook, and yet how could any forget him?



He stood huge in food-stained whites, a man with a crude-oil complexion and mixed ancestry...

...who shuffled about three high-ceiling, steamy rooms like a tractor in low gear.

He was one of those quite rare adults who communicated with small children fairly well and who loved them all impartially.

At least... so everyone thought.

Haunting me now, Haxx? Trying to play upon my nonexistent guilt?

When I think of all the truly great men and women who died at the hands of Farson's minions...when I consider that the house of Eld lies in ruins thanks to traitors like you...



My only regret is that I couldn't see you die more than once.

If it meant I could have saved even one of those precious lives, I'd have turned you in a hundred times over.



"Cort lies dead because of you, and so does Cuthbert, and yet I see them as vividly as I see myself. Damn you, Kax."

"Damn you to hell."

You call that shooting, maggot?

Cuthbert distracted m--

A gunslinger who blames his own faults on others is a pathetic creature indeed.

Idiot! Do you think Farson's men are going to stand around all nice and polite and be cooperative targets?

When bullets are flying and men are dying, are you going to cry their pardon and ask them to be quiet so you can concentrate? Distractions shouldn't matter!

Now stop whining and fire!

KRAK

A marginal improvement, maggot.



A black and white comic panel showing two boys in a hallway. The boy on the left is wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants, and the boy on the right is wearing a dark shirt and dark pants. They are both looking towards the right. The hallway has arched doorways and a stone wall on the right.

I'll kill
the son of
a bitch.

Not you
or me.

You can have
supper in the west
kitchen with me.
Cook will give us
some.

A black and white comic panel showing a close-up of a boy's face. He has a distressed expression, with his hand covering his eyes and forehead. His hair is dark and messy.

He'll tell
Cort.

A black and white comic panel showing two boys. The boy on the left is looking down with a sad expression, and the boy on the right is looking at him with a wide, toothy grin.

He's no friend of
Cort's. And besides,
what if he did?

Sure. Right. I
always wanted to
know how the world
looked when your
head was on
backwards and
upside down.

A black and white comic panel showing a close-up of a boy's face. He is looking down with a somber expression. His hair is dark and messy.

Well, maybe
you'll have your
chance.



Well well. The heirs to th' kingdom, having another of their regular bad days, izzit?

One of these days, Hax'll send you on your way with naught but a swat of the spoon for your trouble.

Hax! Two pathetic and starving lads for ye.



You boys, come over to Maggie. She'll give you some pie.

Then scat. Don't get me in trouble.



Those words, they'd come back to haunt Roland and Bert: "Don't get me in trouble."



For now, though, they don't think beyond the huge wedges of pie put in front of 'em.

Let's eat it upstairs.

All right.



There's no food tastes quite as that which is forbid--

Ghhh! Someone's coming! If it's Cort, we're dead!

Oh, now you're worried about...



...poisoned meat.

Risky.

Ask not what the Good Man can do for you...



But what you can do for him. Sighs. Soldier, ask not.

You know what it could mean.



Yar. And I know my responsibilities to him; you don't need to lecture me. I love Farson, just as you do. Would foiler him to the sea if he asked, so I would.

All right. The meat will be marked for short-term storage in your coldrooms. But you'll have to be quick. You must understand that.

There are children in Taunton?



Children everywhere. It's the children we-- and he--care about.



Poisoned meat. Such a *strange* way to care for children.

Will they curdle and hold their bellies and cry for their mamas? I suppose they will.

It will be like going to sleep.

Heh - Of course.

You said it yourself: "Soldier, ask not." Do you enjoy seeing children under the rule of the gun, when they could be under his hands, ready to start making a new world?



You reply not, and in so doing, speak volumes.



I go on duty in twenty minutes. Give me a joint of mutton and I'll pinch one of your girls and make her giggle.

My mutton will give no cramps to your belly, Robeson.



Hax?
A traitor? A poisoner?

Hax, who put a poultice on my leg that time?

I...could have killed them just now. Killed them both with my knife, slit their throats like hogs.

It would have been doing them a service, considering what's coming.

Roland's father was only just back from the uplands, and he looked out of place amid the drapes and the chiffon fripperies of the main receiving hall.

Fareon's audacity remains unchecked. He marches toward the heart of In-World as if stopping him is an impossibility.

His barbaric acts escalate with his proximity.

Are you certain his hand extends that far, Steven?



Marten is right; I cry your pardon, father, but...the news is urgent.

I would expect it to be naught else. Speak and be heard, my son.

The words spill out of him then, like lava from a volcano, and they likewise leave scorched earth behind them.





"All right. Thee may see him hang."





Do you know who they were talking about, Roland? Do you know who the Good Man is?

I think I do. A former harrier in Gerlan and Desoy...

...who decided there was more money and power in pretending to be the peoples' savior.

Now he goes about talking of democracy and equality while behaving like nothing but a common bandit. He claims to oppose our wealth, but only because he wants it for himself. He even murders people and plays polo with their heads.

If our Fathers caught him, no one else like Cook would have to be neck-popped. If they got the Good Man, wouldn't that end it?

I thought as much, but my father said someone always has to have his neck popped. The people demand it, and if there isn't a turncoat, sooner or later the people make one.



Did you bring bread? To lay under his shoes, like Cort said?

Yeah. You?

Uh-huh.



They walked slowly toward the gibbet, and the birds took wing, cawing and circling like a mob of angry, dispossessed peasants.







They say a man's life flashes before his life when death is galloping toward him.

Cuthbert, he'd been around so short a time that it couldn't have taken more than half an eye blink to hurtle past him.

Hold on, Bert! Hold on! I--

Kccccchhhh!!!



Are you okay, Cuthbert?



I will be... after I've beaten you senseless.







Roland and Bert walked away from the gallows, sat down and waited, and soon the first of the townfolk began to gather...

...mostly families who had come in broken-down wagons and beat-up buckles, carrying their breakfasts with them.

It had to make ya wonder where the honor and nobility that the boys had been taught about was at.

Was it lies all along, or only treasures buried deep by the wise?



It seemed that Hax, in his dirty whites, walking around his steaming kitchen and yelling at the potboys, had more honor than this.

The birds had all flown, but everyone knew they were waiting.



Do you wish to make confession?



I have nothing to confess. I have not forgotten my father's face; it has been with me through all.



Charge be capital murder and sedition. You have crossed the white and I, Charles son of Charles, consign you ever to the black.



I never--

Tell your tale in the underworld, maggot.



*The trap dropped.
Max plummeted through,
still trying to talk.*

*No one listening would
ever forget that: The cook
still trying to talk.*

*And where did he finish
the last sentence he would
ever begin on earth?*

*His words were ended by
the sound an exploding
pineknut makes on the
hearth in the cold heart
of a winter night.*





The land did not fall to the Good Man for another five years, and by that time Roland was a gunslinger...his father was dead...he himself had become a matricide...





Or am I already dead
and damned as well? Is that
why I can see you? I actually
died and I'm simply too
stubborn to realize it?

Out with it!
You've come this
far! Finish the
journey!



Or I swear,
I'll find a way
to send you
back!



And then, as Hax fades from sight,
he leaves behind a single word written
in the blood of mutants and bumbles...



REGRET



TO BE CONTINUED

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES.

THE HANGING OF HAX

Like so many of Roland's youthful experiences, the tale of Gilead's traitorous head cook—and of the poisoning-plot that Roland and Cuthbert discover while eating forbidden pie beneath one of the west kitchen's back stairways—is

not a happy story.

Though Hax has long been the undisputed ruler of the castle's west kitchen and the trusted friend of young gunslinger apprentices, Roland and Bert discover that he is also the secret ally of John Farson, Gilead's most formidable enemy. Faced with the choice of protecting their friend or turning him in for treason, the boys decide to hand Hax over to their fathers. Hax is sentenced to death, and both Roland and Cuthbert attend his execution.

Although in our comics, as in the original *Dark Tower* books, we present Roland's transformation from boy to man as a process that begins in his fourteenth year (after



all, that is when he learns about his mother's affair with his father's enchanter, Marten Broadcloak, and when he challenges his teacher Cort to the traditional all-or-nothing coming-of-age battle in Gilead's Square Yard), in truth Roland's loss of innocence begins with Hax's treason. In later years Roland will encounter the many faces of treachery—he will see his mother betray her kith and kin for passion; he will find out that the girl he loves has been labeled a traitor and burned on a Charyou Tree fire so that powerful but guilty men can go free; he will see Gilead's guards and even one of his fellow gunslingers betray the Affiliation in order to serve the forces of the Outer Dark—but it is with Hax's betrayal, and Roland's realization that even friends may secretly be turncoats, that Roland's innocence truly ends.

In our story, as in the original tale, Roland is only eleven years old when he learns of Hax's secret alliance with John Farson. He



and Cuthbert have been in the Square Yard practicing falconry. (In our version of the tale they are practicing the bah and bolt since I'd already used this falconry scene at the beginning of *The Gunslinger Born*.) Cuthbert is slow at his lessons and so is punished by Cort, who deals him a blow and then sends him away, stating that he must skip both supper and breakfast. Angry at the weapons



master, Roland and Cuthbert turn to their old ally Hax, who they know will feed Bert on the sly. After all, Hax is no friend of Cort's, though as yet we don't know the reason for this animosity.

Unlike gruff and violent Cort who hits his students without compunction (he believes it is the only way to transform them into hardened gunslingers), Hax loves all children impartially, even the dangerous boys who have become gunslinger apprentices.

Openly defying Cort's instructions, Hax gives Cuthbert and Roland graved meat scraps. When a scullery boy informs the chef that a guard has come to speak to him, Hax tells the boys to take two slices of pie and then to scat—he doesn't want them to get him into trouble. Little does Hax know how much trouble Roland and Bert are about to cause him.

Knowing that they must hide their secret feast from the adults, Roland and Cuthbert decide to enjoy their pie "understairs." But while they are sitting behind a huge stone colonnade, two

shadows fall on the wall of the far staircase. Realizing that if they move they will be caught, the two boys sit very still and listen.

The shadows belong to Hax and the visiting guard, both of whom are secret enemies of the Affiliation. The Good Man, John Farson, is plotting an attack upon

the loyal town of Taunton. In two or three weeks a shipment of poisoned meat will arrive at Gilead's freight depot. Hax must store it in his coldrooms before sending it on to Taunton where it will poison every man, woman, and child in the town. Although Hax's loyalty to John Farson's revolution is beyond question ("I love him just as you do," he tells the guard. "Would foller him into the sea if he asked" [108]), to his credit he does question the morality of killing children. In response the guard assures him that the young ones' deaths will be painless. Besides, freeing Mid-World of the gunslingers' tyranny is worth such a sacrifice.

As the conspirators move off, Roland numbly stares at his hands, which are still stained with Hax's gravy and berry juice. "I could have killed them," he thinks. "I could have slit their throats like hogs" (109). But as the depths of Hax's treachery sinks in, and as Roland begins to realize the painful choices that he must now

make, "a taste of warm despair" rises in his throat (109). Although Roland has hitherto lived in a child's world of absolutes where GOOD and EVIL are as easily distinguished from each other as WHITE is from BLACK, he is now faced with a much more confusing picture of reality. Hax has always been Roland's friend—he has fed him, he has poulticed his wounds—but Hax is also a traitor. For the first time in his young life, Roland is faced with a terrible choice. Should he pretend he knows nothing of Hax's conspiracy and let the people of Taunton die, or should he turn Hax in and watch him swing from the hangman's noose?

Stephen King describes Roland's internal struggle in terms of the falconry exercise that our hero witnessed in the Square Yard only a short time before: "What he felt might have been a sort of death—something as brutal and final as the death of the dove in the white sky over the games field" (109). What makes this imagery so powerfully apt is its symbolic resonance.



On the games field, apprentices practice their falconry skills by setting raptors upon their prey. But metaphorically speaking, they are also learning to identify with the hawk—an instinctual killer—and not to mourn the death of the dove, which is the traditional image of peace, love, and gentleness. Cort has always called the hawk "God's gunslinger," but until learning of Hax's secret allegiance, Roland doesn't grasp the subtleties of the comparison. In order to become a fully-fledged member of the gunslinger ka-tet, Roland will have to kill the dove within himself—that which is gentle and peaceful and innocent. In the battle between hawk and dove which takes place within Roland's soul, the outcome is a foregone conclusion. Roland will choose the path of his fathers and Hax will die.

I have always believed that Roland and Cuthbert's decision to hand Hax over for public execution is the first adult decision of their lives. Its importance, brutality, and finality, changes them forever. Until this point the boys are children—disobeying their teachers and hiding from grown-ups so that they can eat forbidden sweets. But the moment they learn of Hax's plot they are forced to examine their true allegiances. What matters to them? What do they believe in? Who do they really respect? Do they go with their hearts—as



children do—or will they stand and be true to abstract ideals though those ideals cause them personal pain?

Ultimately, the boys choose the latter. Although their teacher Cort has hit them and called them maggots and told them that they are not worthy to speak the High Speech of their fathers, and though Hax has fed them and bandaged their wounds, it is ultimately Cort and the gunslingers that the boys decide to honor. They will remember the faces of their fathers, though the price of such remembering is the life of a human being.

As we all know, adulthood and adult understanding do not come all at once. The process is gradual and brings with it much heartache. Although Roland and Bert hand Hax over to their fathers, the profundity of what they have done still eludes them. When Roland's father asks him if causing a man's death preys on his mind, Roland merely shrugs. Hax and the guard are black liars, they

are snakes, and their treachery is a personal affront. Something in Roland has died and Roland wants to punish the chef for the pain he has caused. At this point Roland's reaction still resembles that of a hurt child—one who is still too young and inexperienced to know what execution really means.

It is only when Roland and Cuthbert stand before the gallows tree that they actually comprehend what is about to happen, and how their own choices have affected the greater world:

"For the first time, Roland felt the enormity of his responsibility in the matter; this wood was not noble, not part of the awesome machine of Civilization, but merely warped pine from the Forest o' Barony, covered with splattered white bird droppings. It was splashed everywhere—stairs, railings, platform—and it stank" (114).

Suddenly, Roland and Bert are beset with doubt. Their decision to hand Hax in no longer seems quite so unquestionably honorable. The gallows tree, and the death it

brings, literally stinks. When the gawping crowds arrive with their picnic baskets and their blood lust, both boys are stunned by the ugliness of the scene. They have been taught that honor and nobility are essential parts of the gunslingers' creed, but those virtues are not in evidence atop Gallows Hill. Roland still desperately wants to believe that handing Hax over to the gunslingers was the right thing to do, but suddenly Hax—walking around his steamy kitchens in his dirty cook's whites—seems more honorable than the masses who will witness his death.

As Roland and Cuthbert clasp hands, Hax arrives on his open cart. A black blindfold hangs over his face and only his large girth gives away his identity. A gunslinger with yellow gauntlets throws the noose over Hax's head and asks him if he has anything to confess. Hax declares that he does not—he has remembered the faces of his fathers. With dismay, Roland realizes that many in the crowd sympathize with Hax's cause—revolution is closer to Gilead than the gunslingers may think.

In the end, Roland decides that Hax's death "wasn't such of a much" (116). The cook's legs kick out in a wide Y and then the crowd disperses, leaving the crows to pick at the corpse. Death, like the gallows tree, becomes almost mundane, and we can't help but wonder whether this is the "old and rusty and misshapen" lesson that Roland and Bert were sent to learn—the lesson of the killing field.

By the time this flashback

comes to a close Hax is dead, but something in Roland has died as well. We can call it his innocence, or we can call it his empathy, but either way, the change is final. The Roland who takes a splinter from the gallows tree is a little bit closer to the formidable adult gunslinger we have come to know so well. In the years that follow, Roland will sentence many others to death and there will be no room or time for guilt. Each new life-or-death situation will have its own complexities and its own horrors. Each will entail doubt, but in times of revolution doubt is a luxury that our gunslinger cannot afford. He must remember the faces of their fathers, even when those fathers look like hanging judges.

WRITTEN BY:
ROBIN FURTH
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DENNIS CALERO

SPECIAL PREVIEW OF ISSUE 4 INKS BY SEAN PHILLIPS.







NEXT
BEWARE THE NOT-MEN. DO YA KENNI?





All is not well in Mid-World. Gunslinger Roland Deschain, the young man whose destiny it is to seek and save the Dark Tower, has seen his father's Affiliation fall to the Good Man's forces. With his ka-tet murdered and Gilead in ruins, the troubled Deschain is now truly alone for the first time in his life. But there is hope: Roland stalks the deserts in search of the Man in Black, who holds the key to righting this out-of-synch world. What lies in wait for the world's last gunslinger, though, no seeing sphere could portend...

From the creative team that brought Roland's early adventures to life comes a new phase in the saga of the last gunslinger. This is a dark chronicle of revenge, lust, betrayal, and destiny—a cosmic quest that could only be conceived by master storyteller Stephen King.

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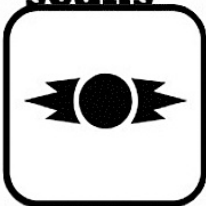
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